

A Few Catty Remarks on James Lyle's Essay

James Lyle has written what purports to be a critique of the prescriptivist position on language usage, and specifically of some writings of mine on that subject. As might be expected, I differ with him on a number of points; what might not be expected is that I differ with him even on the matter of what his own critique is about.

Just as a kind of overture, I will observe that although he disdains stereotypes, he begins by setting up the oldest situation in controversial literature, that in which a wise man is faced with two extreme positions, neither of which he can accept. In simple cases, the wise man generally finds that the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes (the Goldilocks solution); in more complex ones, he resolves the dilemma by constructing a synthesis that combines all that is good in both the simple-minded positions, thereby reaching a truth that transcends them both (the Hegelian¹ solution). Both these variants on the “pox on both your houses” strategy are the equivalent of the Ruy Lopez opening in chess; there may be much to recommend them, but one cannot claim to be avoiding stereotypes in adopting either—“thinking outside the box” has become just another standard ploy.

His depiction of the prescriptivists makes me smile nostalgically; it was indeed the case that in my youth, professors of English, and even more, their graduate students, wore tweed jackets, often with leather elbow patches (and we mustn't forget the regimental-striped rep ties). But that was so long ago! Today's professors and graduate students no longer hope to be taken for members of English county families; they want instead to be taken for mountaineers, construction workers, or commercial fishermen, and they make the faculty lounge look more like a union hiring hall than a London club. (And as a consequence, it has been years since Brooks Brothers was dedicated to good woollens in herringbone weave; today their stores look like a somewhat upscale K-Mart.) Lyle is far from *au courant* with the sartorial affectations of today's humanities departments, but I forgive the anachronism, since he has brought back to me for a moment the days of my youth.

Lyle thinks me a representative ‘prescriptivist’; I usually let people call me that without making a fuss, but I groan inwardly at being so labelled, because accepting it apparently makes me responsible for everything ever said by any prescriptivist, including ones I've never even heard of. (I think myself—and call myself when given the chance—a Linguistic Activist.) I have been engaged for over twenty years in debates with linguists that were nominally about my views and writings, and have found that my opponents are seldom willing to debate *my* views; what they really want to do is debate those of more vulnerable targets, like Robert Lowth; if they are ashamed to attack someone dead more than two hundred years, they pick some contemporary they think they can make short work of.

¹ Actually, Fichtean.

More than a quarter of Lyle's piece, for example, is given over to refuting, or just reviling, John Simon—to be precise, just one remark of Simon's. And this remark of Simon's is somehow linked to me; after all, both of us are prescriptivists, and, says Lyle, Simon is someone "of whom Halpern speaks warmly." I do not recall speaking warmly of Simon; I recall only pointing out that he is a frequent target of linguists looking for a prescriptist who's easy to bash. The only remark of mine that I can see that Lyle might have taken as lending even the slightest substance to his claim is this:

Nunberg, after quoting what he thinks a particularly outrageous statement by Simon, says, "That is the credo of a czarist émigré, not an English grammarian." I have chosen to throw Nunberg's words back at him for two reasons. First, because it amuses me: I am largely in agreement with Simon, ...²

As the context makes clear, my "largely in agreement with Simon" refers to the particular "outrageous statement" being discussed, not to general agreement with everything Simon has ever said, on language or any other subject. In fact, Simon has provided in the passage Lyle quotes a perfect example of an error that prescriptivists keep making (and I keep pointing out), that of attempting to bolster their positions with what they imagine to be linguistic evidence.

I am going to take the risk of examining Lyle's condemnation of Simon's remark, in order to make what I believe to be some necessary distinctions. I say "risk" because it is all but certain that my doing so will inspire some future debating opponent of mine to say that I "defended" Simon, and am rightly subject to all the criticism that he has incurred. But the risk must be taken, because the alternative is to allow mere confusion to prevail. There are two parts to the Simon statement that Lyle quotes: in the first, he expresses his distaste and scorn for a usage-pattern often found in the speech of African-Americans; in the second, he attempts to support his views by claiming that some unspecified principles of "how language works" are violated by those patterns. In the first part he is simply expressing a personal view—a view that, however objectionable, is not a statement of fact to be refuted by anyone with better knowledge of the facts. In the second part Simon *is* making an implied statement of fact, and that part *is* subject to correction by someone having more knowledge of linguistic facts.

So it is quite illegitimate to take the error of the second part, as Lyle does, as discrediting the first part. To do so is to say, in effect, that if a disputant gets any fact wrong, or makes any claim that is not justified, then his opinions and feelings, although unconnected logically to that fact or claim, are to be dismissed. This illegitimate step is particularly easy to take in this case, because the opinion expressed in the first part will be obnoxious to most people, and there is strong temptation to discredit it on any grounds we can find, without worrying too much about their validity. But the inference is illegitimate, and the temptation must be resisted if we are to argue soundly; the man making a groundless claim to factual knowledge may be an ignoramus or poseur, but

² From my "Why Linguists Are Not To Be Trusted..." available, as Lyle says, at www.vocabula.com.

exposing him as such cannot be taken as discrediting his logically independent expression of pure opinion. No, I am not “defending Simon”; I am defending sound argumentation.

But why does Lyle spend so much of his space on Simon, anyway? I understand my critics’ reluctance to engage me, and their need for some easier target; my arguments are unanswerable, and my conclusions transparently correct. But it is tiresome to read paper after paper that claims to respond to me, but instead attacks Swift or Johnson or Lowth, or if too proud to attack the dead, Safire, Barzun, or Simon. Perhaps it would be shrewd of me to make some egregious error in fact or reasoning in some future essay, so that my critics would have something to get their teeth into, and would risk taking me on; it would be a small price to pay for getting their attention.

I note that on the one issue where Lyle does actually quote and deal directly with something I wrote—my statement that linguistics has nothing to do with decisions on usage—he says, “The point is well taken...” But then he adds that I seem not to have noticed that linguists “seem to agree, at least in part.” As one who has been debating with linguists for many years, I can assure Lyle that linguists very rarely, even in part, accept that prescriptivists are independent observers, free to pass usage judgements on moral and esthetic grounds, and to do so without incurring rebuke from linguists. Academic linguists, in my long and varied experience, take a highly proprietary and turf-guarding attitude toward anything to do with language, and have sprayed all the trees over a very wide area with the signs of their ownership. I have extracted an admission from one or two, over the years, that linguists and prescriptivists have very different sorts of interest in language, and that the latter are not actually trespassing on territory owned by the former, but these admissions are very rare, made very reluctantly, and are subject to quick withdrawal when they seem to lead to undesirable conclusions.

Lyle notes, correctly, that Geoffrey Nunberg, Steven Pinker, and I have employed analogies in our essays. We had no choice but to do so; analogy—likening the unknown, or the incompletely known, to the fully or at least better known—is our chief tool in exploration and argumentation. In arguing with Nunberg and Pinker, I found that both offered analogies that were potentially even better than they realized, and could be extended to illuminate even more of the subject than their authors thought. I extended them accordingly, and showed how they really supported not their authors’ positions, but mine. Lyle attempts to do the same to me, picking up one of the analogies where I left it, and claiming that, extended even further, it refutes or at least modifies my position. But his attempt fails; he even provides me with further support for my own position.

Pinker pointed out, quite correctly, that the prescriptivist’s rules for language usage have no more to do with human language (he meant, as linguists generally do when they speak of language *tout court*, those aspects of language that he is professionally interested in) than the tastes of the cat fancy have to do with mammalian biology. I in turn pointed out that if the fancy has no business dictating to the biologists, neither have the biologists any business dictating to the fancy. Now Lyle tries to hoist me with my own petard by showing that the fancy-is-to-biologist-as-prescriptivist-is-to-linguist analogy can be pushed further, and when so pushed shows that my position has its own weakness. He

tells us that in pursuing their ideas of feline perfection, the fancy and the breeders who cater to them have produced some cats that have serious health problems. This shows, Lyle implies, that the fancy should be guided, in part at least, by the biologists, and by analogy, that prescriptivists should be guided by linguists.

Since this essay is almost entirely a disputatious one, I will take this welcome opportunity to say that I agree with Lyle on one point, at least. I regard the *felidae*, from the house cat up to the Bengal tiger, as among the most beautiful creatures on earth, and I am horrified by what some breeders have done to them. Even without the health problems that may result, the turning of a cat, one of nature's triumphs, into one of the ghastly creatures one sees at cat shows seems to me little short of depraved. But when Lyle suggests that the fancy would do well to listen to the mammalian biologists rather than consult their own tastes, he leaves reality behind. The biologists are not, *qua* biologists, interested in cats or in animal welfare; they are scientists, and scientists who, in pursuit of their own goals, may well have made the lives of some animals hell. And the fanciers who have caused breeders to create feline monstrosities are not unaware of the health problems their tastes have created; indeed, as the owners and caretakers of those cats, they are acutely aware of them—they just prefer realizing their own visions of cat beauty, however bizarre, to having healthy, normal cats.

So when Lyle asks rhetorically, “But surely a little attention to biological principles could guide us away from the aesthetic decisions that lead to such tragedies?”, he needs to be answered; no, there is no *biological* principle that would prevent a fancier from preferring his own aesthetic objectives to good cat health. The only thing that will stop the fanciers from the breeding decisions that both Lyle and I deplore is the moral, not biological, principle that the health and happiness of sentient creatures is not to be sacrificed to the gratification of aesthetic whims. And to move back to the plane of language usage, there is no *linguistic* principle that will prevent a prescriptivist, Simon or anyone else, from coming up with edicts that are useless, ill-informed, or objectionable; he will be corrected only by the refusal of the educated public to accept his edict, or by chastisement at the hands of other prescriptivists.